DISCOVERING OUR TRUE BUDDHA NATURE


We own our Minds

As I'm sure you know the essence of the Buddhist path is mind training, which in the West is known as meditation. In the Buddhadharma it takes the central place, everything else revolves around it. And this is as it should be because in one way the mind is the only thing we have. Apart from it, we cannot experience anything either within ourselves or without. If the consciousness goes, we're like a log, we're just a corpse, or a vegetable if our heart is still beating.

The essential problem in our lives is our own Minds.

It is very important to appreciate that the essential problem in our lives is our own minds. As long as we are always blaming things on the outside - our upbringing and our parents, our environment, our workplace, our spouse, or the government or the country or the world, or Samsara, we will always be going outwards, trying to mend little bits here and there, applying stickers and Band-Aids over our problems. But the basic dissatisfaction, the basic problems, don't go away no matter how hard we try.

We try so hard to arrange things on the outside, so that they fit in with our ideas of what would make us happy and content. But it doesn't work. We are like that proverbial rodent on the wheel, endlessly scrambling, exhausting ourselves and going nowhere. Sooner or later we realize this. Then we start looking for answers to our problems. Why are we dissatisfied? Why are we not happy? That is when people begin to turn inward and look for an inner answer to their problems. As soon as we do this, as soon as we turn our attention away from all the external problems and turn it into ourselves and see that basically our problems stem from our own responses to life, then we should feel enormous
relief. After all, if all the problems come from the outside, or if all the problems stem from our infancy, which, after all, is gone and irrevocable, then there's not much hope. But if the real answer lies in the present, right now, within us, then there's enormous hope. Therefore, Dharma practitioners should always be very joyful and not look so solemn!

**We need to tame and cultivate our own minds.**

Shantideva, an Indian scholar and practitioner of the 7th century, points out that the world is covered with thorns and thistles, stones and pebbles and that if we walk barefoot across that kind of path, we will always be stubbing our toes and hurting ourselves. So, what are we going to do? Are we going to carpet the earth? That's not possible. But if we take just two pieces of leather and put them under our feet as sandals or shoes, then we can walk anywhere and we are protected. But like trying to carpet the earth, if we try to make the whole world, our entire external environment, perfect and smooth and without conflict, we'll find that's impossible, too. We are always going to meet people who annoy us. We are always going to meet situations that don't come up to our expectations. This is the way things are. And if we hope that we can somehow create an external environment which will always come up to our expectations, then we are always going to be sadly disappointed. But we don't need to do that because if we learn how to tame and cultivate our own mind, then we can deal with everything outside.

**We can change ourselves!**

This is wonderfully good news because we do own our minds. We cannot always change the external environment. We certainly cannot change many or most of the people we encounter. But we can change ourselves and once we are changed, everything changes. Things are still going to happen to us that we can't prevent, but how we respond to those situations will then profoundly influence the results of whatever situation we are in. This is so important
because how we respond to situations will not only change those situations but also create our future. Our lives are basically in our own hands. We have so much responsibility but this is a wonderful thing - our life is in our own hands. We don't have to give it away to anyone else. We don't have to blame anyone else. We don't have to blame ourselves either. How we respond moment to moment creates our life for us. This is why different people meeting with very much the same kind of situation react differently - some are broken, some are exalted. Same situation, different mindset.

**Our Untamed Mind is Causing us Misery**

The BuddhaDharma says that all things are mind. What it means by this is not that there is no external reality, but that we cannot know that external reality except through our minds. Even our senses - our eyes, our nose, our ears, our taste, and our touch - are conditioned by our human body. Everything that we see is only how it is brought into us through our senses and then interpreted to us by our consciousness. Beyond that we cannot know anything. Even modern physics says that everything that appears so extremely solid is really mostly space with just a few little atoms whirling around in it. In just one cell, the distance between the nucleus and the rest of the neutrons and electrons moving around is the same as the distance between the planets and the stars – a vast amount of space with very, very little in it. Yet to us things are very solid. If I hit somebody with an object, that person would certainly feel it. So it's not that it's all our illusion on a relative level. Nevertheless, how something is and how it appears to us are two different things. Therefore we should learn not to take things so concretely.

We tend to think everything is so real. The people that we meet also seem so existent. We ourselves are so real, and along with that, our thoughts and our emotions are so valid. They seem so solid. So when we think something, when we have an idea, we absolutely believe it. We think that it is really true because
it's what we believe. It doesn't matter that everyone else is telling us we're crazy. I know because this is my thought. The same is so with our emotions. We believe so deeply in our happiness, our sorrows, our anger, our greed, our jealousies, and our joys. We think they are really true. When we're down, we're down, and we're going to be down forever. When we're up, we're up and that's it - we're never coming down again. We're completely encased in our thoughts and our emotions. It's as though there's no distance, as though we're completely suffocated. It's like being in the middle of a big ocean and the waves rolling over us are our emotions, our thoughts and our beliefs. And there's no separation. This is me. That's why people are suffering. Even when we remember something that happened when we were children and caused us a lot of distress, we totally identify with it - even to the present day. We cannot drop it. We think this is me, this is who I am. And it causes us so much grief. Presumably many of you have realized this and that is why you are all sitting here now because we realize that the mind, untamed and untrained, is causing at least 98 percent of our misery. We'll give a little two percent to the external environment but if our minds were really together, we would be able to deal with that too.

How much Attention do we Give our Minds?

When we look at our mind, what do we have? Usually, it's utter chaos. We all sit here looking very much like a lot of Arhats and Bodhisattvas but I wonder, if we had a microphone attached and everybody could hear through a loudspeaker what we were thinking, wouldn't it be a revelation? And wouldn't we have an incentive to train our minds?

So the problem is that we give so much time and attention in our culture to taking care of our bodies, to training them, to making sure we're very healthy and that we eat the right kinds of food and keep ourselves clean and decently dressed. Of course, that is important but how much attention do we give to the mind? How much do we exercise the mind? How much cleansing? Do we adorn the mind
with beautiful thoughts? If we could open up our mind, would it look like a beautiful palace or temple, or would it look like a junk heap? Only each one of us can know how it is. And if we wouldn't want to live in a garbage site, we should realize that as long as our minds are untrained, that is exactly where we are living, because the closest thing we have, the only place where we can actually live, is within our mind. That's our home. It doesn't matter if we're living here in Cambridge or if we go to India or Korea or Japan or wherever. It doesn't matter what external environment we have, the one thing we take with us is our mind. How much attention do we give to that?

**Integrate Practice into our Daily Lives**

So, then, you come here and you sit. And while you are sitting you are able to see what is going on inside. Most people don't even have a clue what is going on. They've never even asked. So already you have a wonderful advantage in that you at least have the desire to look inside, because that's the last place most people would want to look. So I congratulate you on that. However, as I'm sure you're all very aware, merely coming together every day to sit is not enough. It's not enough because the Buddhist path is a path of transformation. It's about taking our untamed, unenlightened minds and turning them into our genuine Buddha nature. There are many other things that need to be done in order to create this inner transformation. Now, there are many, many things one could say about this but I'll limit myself to two main points. One is that it is essential to have a practice that completely integrates one's sitting and one's everyday life.

One of the things which is extremely admirable about the Zen tradition – one among many things - is that it has this appreciation that everyday life is practice. This is so important, to realize that every single action we do throughout the day, if done in a state of presence, of really being totally with the action in the moment, being completely aware in a non-conceptual presence, is the essence
of the practice. Therefore, whatever one is doing, if one does it with this non-conceptual awareness, it is the same as if one is sitting in meditation.

**Be Aware of the Presence of our Minds**

The essence of the practice is to develop a mind which is totally present, totally vast, spacious and conscious, instead of our ordinary, untrained mind, which is just chatter, chatter, chatter. Unless we are really very well trained, normally what happens is that when we are doing one thing we are thinking about a hundred other things. The one thing we are usually not thinking about is what we are really doing. This is why people always have this sense of frustration about the state that they can get into while they’re sitting and then their everyday life. Sometimes the deeper the practice of sitting, the further one seems to be from the practice of our everyday consciousness. The only way to link the two is by carrying, as much as possible, that sense of presence into everything we do.

This kind of presence does not need to be very tight and narrow. There are times when our attention needs to be one-pointed. When one is driving, for example, one has to concentrate to a certain extent on what one is doing. When one is doing anything very, very precise - for example, a surgeon who is operating - one needs to be very one-pointed. The surgeon does not need at the point of operating to have a very panoramic awareness. Nonetheless, for much of the time, it is important to know how to develop this very spacious mind - not a tight, hard kind of mind which at the end of the day would lead one to feel completely exhausted, but a mind which is very open but completely aware, completely poised and attentive. It looks very casual, very relaxed even, but it’s very precise.

Suzuki Roshi said that the way to control your cow is to give it a vast pasture. We don’t have to put a rope on it and tether it with about two feet of space. Give it a wide pasture and why would it go? Likewise, if we try to keep the mind too tight it’s going to rebel or get exhausted and stressed. But if we allow our mind to
become very vast but we are nonetheless aware of what the mind is doing in any moment, then the mind becomes naturally relaxed and quiet. It quietens down, but we are present with what we are doing in the moment.

The example that comes to mind about this is the following. When I was living in India, I lived up in the Himalayas at about 12,000 feet in a small cave. In the summertime, sometimes a shepherd would go by with his flocks. He would just go by, there was a meadow below the cave. One day a teenaged boy came up. He had obviously never been with the sheep before so he was terrified of losing even a single one, especially the goats, which were always running off. He was very, very nervous. He knew that if he lost any sheep he'd get a big beating when he got back, so he was keeping them tightly together in the flock. All day long, whenever I looked out, he was sending them over here and he was sending them over there, keeping them very tightly together, with the result that at the end of the day the sheep were extremely nervous. They hadn't really had anything to eat and the boy was completely exhausted as she went back down the mountain side. The next day the regular shepherd came back up. He was an old guy and he did what he always did which was to take the sheep down to the meadow, leave them alone, go and sit up on the little hillock, lie out there with his bottle of beer, and just watch them. So, of course, the sheep wandered about and there was plenty to eat and then, after a while, they just lay down. The shepherd spent the whole day just watching them, keeping an eye on them, he was not sleeping. At the end of the day he rounded them up and took them back down and everyone was happy.

**Keep a Relaxed and Mindful Mind**

This is a perfect example of what I'm talking about. If we try to keep our minds too rigid, too controlled, all that happens is that we get very stressed and uptight. I'm sure you've seen that happening. People try so hard to be perfect and good and not lose anything and keep their minds the way they're supposed to, but all
that happens is that they end up with a kind of nervous condition in the body that the Tibetans call loong, where the prana in the body, the energy or Qi, goes completely crazy. It's because we try too hard, and all that happens is that we end up very nervous. Instead, what we should try to do is keep the mind very relaxed, very spacious. Not relaxed, spacious, half asleep and losing it, or just chattering away and loose, but a very spacious mind in which the central awareness is absolutely poised so that whatever is going on in the body, with the feelings, in the mind, or in the environment, we know. We're not lost in our memories of what was happening yesterday or last year or when we were children. We're not lost in our thoughts and anticipations of what's going to happen next or tomorrow or next year. We're not commenting, we're not judging. We're not carrying on our usual fantasies and mental chatter. We are with what is happening in the moment, just with it, that is all.

Now, if our minds can sustain that presence then whatever happens we have the space to deal with it. Whatever comes into the mind, we recognize it, we accept it and we let it go. We don't hold onto it. We don't identify with it because, coming back to what I said before, our problem is that we try to identify. We identify with our memories, our thoughts, our feelings, our emotions. We think this is me, and therefore we suffer. We need to see that memories are just mental states, emotions are just states, feelings are just states, the thoughts that come into our minds are just mental states. They're like bubbles. They arise, they expand and they burst, to be replaced by other bubbles. This is not who we are.

**Discover the True Nature of Our Minds**

The nature of the mind is like the vast sky, like a huge, blue endless sky, very clear, very, very deep and stretching in all directions. It's vast and infinite and clear and empty and transparent and luminous. That is the nature of the mind. Our thoughts and feelings and memories are the clouds appearing in the sky. Sometimes the clouds are white and fluffy and we're happy. Sometimes they're
big and black and there’s thunder and lightning and we're utterly distraught. But either way, they don’t affect the nature of the sky. However black they are, the sky is not soiled. However light and pretty they are, the sky is not any more beautified. You cannot make the sky any purer or dirtier. The sky is just something that is, and it’s transparent and luminous and clear. So why not identify with the sky rather than with the transitory clouds? To change the metaphor, if we realized that all the thoughts and emotions that come up in our minds are just the play of the mind and that the mind is like a vast ocean, that these thoughts and feelings are just waves that rise and sink back into the ocean again, we would realize that we should not take them too seriously.

When we sit and meditate, if we sit with sincerity, then we are definitely able to at least glimpse this transparent nature of the mind and from that, at least, touch who we truly are which is something infinite and vast. Usually, because we identify with the transitory personalities we happen to be assuming in this lifetime, we seem to be such little solid masses, one against the other. It’s me and everything else that is non-me. Everyone else is out there, and then there’s me. We are all thinking me, me, me. But when we touch the nature of the mind, which is our true nature, our Buddha nature, then we see that, of course, we are actually all completely connected. The sky is not one sky and then there’s another sky and then another. There’s just sky, and it is infinite and vast. It is not my sky versus your sky. It is not my Buddha nature versus your Buddha nature. It’s just Buddha nature. There’s just Mind. Therefore, we are all very intricately interconnected with each other.

When we realize this, then we realize that just as we wish only to receive kindness, respect and love from others, so also others would like to receive these things from us because others are us at a very profound level. Which brings me to the second point which is that it is very important in our practice to not simply develop through the head, through the intellect, to learn how to clarify the mind, but also to learn how to open up the heart.
Buddhahood consists of the unity of wisdom and compassion, wisdom and love. Wisdom alone is not enough. It’s like the two wings of a bird. We cannot have one wing without the other wing. We need both wings in order to fly. When our minds become a little settled, a little more peaceful, a little clearer, then we are able to see things more clearly, with less confusion, with less self-reference. We begin to see things as they really are. And when we begin to see things as they really are, one of the first things of which we become aware is the pain of others.

Now, most of us go around - successfully or unsuccessfully - putting on a brave front, trying to be as cheerful and look as competent as we can. But scratch the surface a little and we come across this enormous mass of confusion and pain and uncertainty and hurt which so many people carry around and don’t know what to do with. Now, just as we, when we are suffering, need someone to at least look at us with kindness, so all beings want that. It’s not that we all need to immediately rush off and join Mother Teresa. But at least in our lives, in our everyday lives, meeting the people with whom we meet, we should treat each one with respect and kindness. Is that too much to ask? Again and again, one finds that when people take up a Buddhist practice, they become very cold. I wonder why. There is so much talk about compassion. But often it ends up being rather intellectual. It doesn’t seem sometimes to percolate down into people’s hearts. So people are not spontaneously kinder, are not necessarily the sort of people that one would actually go to with one’s problems. Even in Sanghas, people are polite with one another, but are they kind? After all, if we are in a Sangha, we are each other’s family. If we are not nice to each other, then to whom can we be nice?

When we talk about our practice we say that we are practicing the Bodhisattva path and the Bodhisattva path is to save all sentient beings. But just who are these sentient beings? I mean, it’s nice and easy to sit on one’s carpet and say, ‘Well, I’m going to save all sentient beings.’ It’s very comfortable to feel altruistic and think that. But then we go home and we meet our husband or our wife or our
mother or our father or whomever and they do something to annoy us and we completely blow up. The fact is that for all our talk about love and compassion, we must look at ourselves and say, ‘Are we actually nicer people for all this? Have we actually become kinder? Is our heart really warmer than it was when we started?’ If it is, then very good, keep going. If it isn't, then we're in trouble.

Our practice has to be from the heart. If our practice isn't from the heart, it has no validity. The head is the computer, but the genuine mind is at a much profounder level than that. When we talk about mind in Buddhism, we don't just mean the intellectual side of it but the whole emotional part, the intuitive, the very deep level of our being which does not reside up in the head. So if our sitting practice is all up in this computer part of the brain there will never be any very profound transformation. We have to bring our practice downwards. It has to permeate through our whole body, every cell of our body. This is a very, very crucial point.

We are very head-oriented in the West. Those of you who have been meditating for any length of time have, I'm sure, experienced moments when the mind, or the computer, fell away and you were in another state of consciousness, one much clearer and vaster than our normal state of consciousness. This is the consciousness we have to connect with. When we connect with this consciousness our hearts open up and genuine love and compassion appear. When we have this genuine profound insight which is completely linked and combined with spontaneous love and compassion - even if only for just a short time - then we know we are genuinely on the Buddhist path. Until then, as long as our practice is still basically theoretical, or basically still head-oriented, we have quite a long way to go. Once we genuinely reach to the profound levels of our Buddha nature then we can really start to meditate.

Of course, insight into our true nature is not the end of the path; it's the beginning. Therefore, while it's important and wonderful to sit every day, it's also important to bring that quality of mind as much as possible into our everyday life. At the same time, cultivate a softness, a kindness, realizing that every being in
front of us is trapped just as we are in Samsara, and like ourselves, needs a little kindness. If we cannot manage that much, then why are we saying that we are doing this for all sentient beings? Those beings include our family, our colleagues, people that we meet in our everyday lives, when going to work and in our social lives. It is very important that we realize that each person in front of us is unique and uniquely important because they are the one person in front of us. Therefore, they are, at that moment, our Dharma practice. Where else is our Dharma practice?